INCLUSION

BRIEF

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Legal Requirements

Since 1975, federal law has required that students with disabilities have access to school and a free appropriate public education. In December 2004, Congress reformed and renamed the law. The new law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), continues to require school districts to educate children in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Florida Statutes (F.S.) offer parallel language stating that, “Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of exceptional education students from regular classes shall occur only when the nature or severity of the handicap cannot be satisfactorily accommodated with supplementary aids and services in the regular classroom.” (Section 230.22(2)(2) F.S.) The emphasis on participation in the general education curriculum is intended to focus attention on the accommodations or modifications necessary to enable students with disabilities to access the general education curricula as well as a strong presumption in favor of a regular classroom placement.[1]

The extent to which an individual student participates in the regular education setting with the use of supplementary aids and services is determined on a case-by-case basis by the individual educational plan (IEP) team. This requires individualized inquiry into the unique educational needs of each student so that the team can determine the possible range of aids and supports that would enable the student to be educated satisfactorily in the regular education environment before a more restrictive placement is considered.

Though the regular classroom is the first placement option for special education services to be considered, federal regulations and state laws also recognize that additional placement options may be necessary. Florida Statute states that “[a] continuum of alternative exceptional education placements shall be available.” (Section 230.22(2)(1)F.S.). This portion of the law is designed to ensure that each student is educated in the LRE that is appropriate for the student. Among the specific options within the continuum are supplementary consultation, resource room, special class, special day school, or hospital/homebound instruction (Section 230.22(2)(4)F.S.).

LRE and Inclusion

Neither federal nor state law uses the term *inclusion*. However, both laws indicate a clear preference for educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their typical peers.[2] This preference has become recognized as inclusion. A comprehensive definition of inclusion was developed by the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI).

> Providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society. (1995, p.99)[3]

It is helpful to further examine the NCERI definition. Explanations of key terms can be found in the table below.

Table 1

Key Term	Explanation
supplementary aids and support services	assistive technology, environmental adaptations, specialized instructional strategies, peer supports, curricular adaptations or modifications, and collaborative teaching
age appropriate classroom	all students within one to two years of the same chronological age
neighborhood school	the school the student would attend if he or she did not have an exceptionality label

Beliefs Supporting Inclusive Education

Collaboration between all members of a school community is essential. This collaboration occurs when educators work together and support each other in an effort to provide the highest quality curriculum and instruction for all the students they serve.

Inclusion and school improvement are linked. Inclusion of students with disabilities is not a peripheral issue to be confined within the special education structures of schools. Special educators, regular educators, and communities must work together to identify common ground and develop shared agendas for creating schools that meet everyone's needs.[4] An example of a shared agenda can be found in the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation. The assessment and reporting requirements of NCLB apply to all students. The assessment scores of most students with disabilities are no longer removed or discounted in the measurement of adequate yearly progress.

Equity, access, and support are critical components of success for all students. Standard curricula should be adapted or modified to fit the needs of individual students. The majority of students with disabilities are expected to meet general education curriculum requirements with appropriate instruction and accommodations provided in general education classrooms with support through consultation, support facilitation, co-teaching, and learning labs. Trained and knowledgeable teachers from both special and general education come together at initial planning stages to make the standard curricula accessible to all learners.[5]

Inclusive education has benefits for all involved. Researchers have established a significant body of evidence that points to the mutual rewards of inclusive schooling. When children with disabilities have opportunities for repeated interactions with their typical peers, they have demonstrated improvements in the skill areas of communication, socialization, reading, mathematical problem-solving, writing, and spelling, as well as the functional skills of everyday living. When typical peers are given opportunities to tutor or assist others, they have been found to have more positive attitudes toward human differences, to show greater tolerance for other people in general, to have improved self-esteem, and to be much more likely to engage in relationships with people with disabilities in their adult lives.[6]

State of the Practice in Florida

Even though many school districts in the state have implemented inclusive education initiatives over the past ten years, data show a minimal increase in the numbers of students receiving appropriate instruction in general education settings for core subjects. There are strong indications that more effort is required.

In order to sustain and expand inclusive schools, several factors must be considered. These include the following

1. Inclusive practices require collaboration and interdependence among administrators, staff, students and family members.
2. Inclusive models promote more creative and efficient use of existing resources.
3. Students with disabilities are valued members of general education classrooms whose teachers hold high expectations for student success in the school and community.
4. Effective teachers use a variety of approaches, instructional strategies, and curricular adaptations that are tailored to each student's learning abilities, needs, styles, and preferences.
5. Professional development focuses on skills and capacities as well as thoughtful and reflective actions of staff.
6. Students with disabilities are included and carefully considered in the collection, organization, analysis, interpretation, and whole school planning related to student achievement data.[7]

A wide variety of research-based instructional strategies have been developed to meet the diverse learning needs of students found in Florida classrooms. A description of effective strategies and models as well as websites that provide more detailed information can be found in table 2.

Table 2

Effective Strategies/Models
Collaborative Teaching Models are service delivery options that include consultation, co-teaching and support facilitation. Information on collaborative teaching models can be found online at http://www.floridainclusionnetwork.com.
Continuous Improvement Model (CIM) is a quality-based approach that tracks student performances, is based on research, helps close the achievement gap between all racial and socioeconomic sub-groups, and is performance-driven. Implemented at all levels, the CIM treats students individually by assessing how much they're learning at regular intervals.
Cooperative Learning Structures are specific combinations of student interactions designed to be used with almost any academic content to increase opportunities for all students to contribute and succeed. Information can be found online at http://www.cooperativelearning.com.
Curriculum Accommodations involve changes in instruction and assessment that are needed by students with disabilities to help them participate and make progress in the general curriculum. For more information on different curriculum accommodations, visit http://www.cpt.fsu.edu/ese/.
Curriculum Modifications are changes in content or what a student is expected to learn in the general education setting. Information on curriculum modifications can also be found online at http://www.cpt.fsu.edu/ese/.
Differentiated Instruction means teaching so that students have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn. For more information, search the http://www.ascd.org website for *differentiated instruction*.
Positive Behavioral Supports involve the assessing and reengineering of environments so students with problem behaviors experience reductions in these behaviors and increase social, personal, and professional quality in their lives. For more information, visit http://www.pbis.org.
Peer Support Systems usually pair a student with a disability with a same age classmate who does not have a disability. Models are designed to provide reciprocal benefits to students through peer modeling; relationship building; academic support; and expanded opportunities to socialize, communicate, and demonstrate learning competencies. For more information on peer supports, visit http://www.jsel.com.

Table 2 (cont.)

Response to Intervention (RtI) is an integrated approach to service delivery that encompasses general and special education systems and requires multidisciplinary collaboration throughout. It is found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, in direct alignment with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and referring to the practice of providing high quality instruction matched to students needs and using rate of learning over time to make important educational decisions.
Strategic Instruction Model promotes effective teaching and learning through two kinds of interventions to address the performance gap between what students are expected to do and what students are able to do. *Content Enhancement Routines* are teacher focused interventions directed at how teachers think about, adapt, and present their critical content in learner-friendly fashion. The *Learning Strategies Curriculum* contains student-focused interventions designed to provide the skills and strategies students need to learn the content. For more information, visit http://www.ku-crl.org/iei/sim.

Resources

We are fortunate in our state to have multiple resources positioned to assist schools and school districts to implement inclusive education practices. These include fiscal as well as human resources designed to provide professional development, learning opportunities, and information to educators, families ,and community members. Links to the websites of several networks and special projects are listed below.

1. The **Florida Inclusion Network (FIN)** maintains a statewide network of facilitators to assist schools and school districts in the implementation of research-based effective and inclusive educational practices. FIN provides professional development and technical assistance designed to support students with diverse learning needs. http://www.floridainclusionnetwork.com

2. The **Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS)** is a statewide network comprised of nineteen local associate centers, five statewide specialized centers and five regional assistive technology labs. FDLRS provides statewide instructional and technology support to individuals and programs serving exceptional students and their parents, along with location and identification of children with disabilities or those who are at risk of developing special needs. FDLRS four major functions are human resource development, technology, child find, and parent services. http://www.fdlrs.org

3. The **Effective Instructional Practices Project (Project CENTRAL*)*** is a comprehensive, statewide project designed to identify and disseminate information about resources, professional development, and current and emerging research based instructional practices. http://reach.ucf.edu/~central/index.html.

4. The **Accommodations and Modifications for Students with Disabilities Project** develops products and provides services to school districts designed to support the implementation of the Sunshine State Standards for Special Diploma, course descriptions, and the use of appropriate accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. http://www.cpt.fsu.edu/ese/

Endnotes

1 From *Educating Students with Disabilities in General Education Classrooms: A Summary of the Research.* Compiled by the Western Regional Resource Center, University of Oregon, 2002.

2 National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities.(1997). *Least Restrictive Environment Background Text, Module 8.* Washington, D.C.

3 National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion. (1995). *National Study of Inclusive Education.* New York: City University of New York.

4 Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

5 Carrico, M.L. (2000). *The placement dilemma: least restrictive environment.* Available at www.modrall.com

6 Staub, D. (1994) What are the outcomes for nondisabled children in inclusive settings? *Educational Leadership,* 52, 36-41.

7 From *F.A.C.T. Folio: Administrator Tools for Inclusive Schools*. (2004). Florida Inclusion Network.

Just Read, Florida!

The New Department of Education

John L. Winn, Commissioner

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